Philosophy of Research and Scholarship
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My personal and professional mission is "to teach, organize, and host people in transition, so they grow in faith and hope, control their own decisions and resources, and use their gifts and talents." This mission influences my philosophy of research and scholarship.

My approach to research and scholarship is more like the approach of program evaluation. I do not get very enthusiastic for research just for the sake of knowledge collection. I do get very enthusiastic about program evaluation because I think it is a better use of time and resources. I think program transformation occurs with program evaluation. It is not just information for information sake.

For me, there are important differences between "research" and "program evaluation." Research takes place in more precisely controlled settings. Program evaluation takes place, usually, in community settings that cannot and probably do not want to control for number of participants or to randomly select those who receive services and those who do not receive services. Research collects data in order to prove some hypothesis and to contribute to the general knowledge base in a professional field. Program evaluation collects information in order to judge the value or usefulness of specific, ongoing programming.

I prefer this definition of program evaluation: "systematic collection of information about programs for use by key stakeholders to make decisions about what those programs are doing" (Adapted from Jacobs, 1988; M. Q. Patton, 1997).

I subscribe to the "decision-making model" of program evaluation as described by Madaus, Scriven, and Stufflebeam (1983). The Decision-making Model is used to make decisions regarding future design and use of a program. This model allows for a wide variety in methodology for data collection. Qualitative methods (such as interviews, observations, and surveys) as well as quantitative methods (such as records and tests) can be used. The choices depend on what is needed from the evaluation in order to make decisions.

For me, program evaluation becomes simply part of the overall program cycle. Program leaders plan, do, review, and decide about programming. The process of program evaluation occurs at every part of the programming cycle. When program evaluation is well-thought-out, it can enhance each step of the cycle. Evaluation can become part of the regular business of the program cycle, rather than being an "add-on" to the program

Sometimes, evaluations focus on examining programs as the programs are happening. This is called "formative evaluation." Sometimes, evaluations focus on examining programs after the program has occurred. This is called "summative evaluation."

In general, most specific questions in which I am interested may be categorized into one of these six types:

1. Needs Assessment: What is the need in the community or group that suggests that there is a need for this program?
2. Program Accountability: How do we know the program resources are being used as the provider(s) intended?
3. Program Improvement: How shall we change or improve the program over time?
4. Program Effectiveness: How effective is the program with the target population?
5. Community Impact: What is the program's impact on the community environment and social systems?
6. Program Impacts: Which program approaches or methods are most effective with specific audiences?

In my experience, evaluation of newer programs tends to focus on the process of needs assessment, accountability and program improvement (groups 1, 2 and 3). Evaluation of more established programs tends to focus on assessing program effects, community change, and program impact (groups 4, 5, and 6).

I am most interested currently in helping to inform major stakeholders about early education program "outcomes." Outcomes are benefits for participants during or after their involvement with a program. Outcomes could be knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, behaviors, conditions, or status. Some programs might have short-term outcomes that lead to long-term outcomes. I am interested in helping link the more easily measured short-term outcomes to the longer-term outcomes that focused research has described.

These are some definitions of areas (or domains) in which change might be measured in order to evaluate program impact: behavior, skill, and knowledge. Behavior is established practice to habitually perform certain functions that the participants did not perform prior to the program. Skill is acquired ability to actually do certain activities that the participant did not know how to do before the program. Knowledge is the acquired factual information that the participant did not know before the program.

Any method can be used before instruction (known as a "pre-test") or after instruction (known as a "post-test"). Another possibility is to administer any of the methods in a retrospective fashion, i.e., information about the subject's condition before the intervention is actually collected after the intervention has occurred.

Sometimes, the tools or approaches for program evaluation do not really include everyone served by the program. For example, participants with limited English or low literacy skills may have more difficulty with the survey instruments than those with better language skills. Children may have a difficult time with interviews and questionnaires because of the complexity of the questions or items. In addition, program evaluators are increasingly concerned with the issue of cultural sensitivity.

Here are some suggestions I have found useful in order to modify information collection procedures:

1. Read the items and responses out loud to learners.

2. Simplify the wording to match reading levels.
3. Help the participants learn how to use the scales, such as those on checklists.
4. Administer surveys in short forms, with just a few questions at a time.
5. Set up surveys as informal interviews to make them more appealing and less like a test.
6. Allow enough time to finish the survey.